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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000494

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [OPRC](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KMDR](#) [KPAO](#) [AM](#)  
SUBJECT: ARMENIAN TV BECOMING FREER ... FOR NOW

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b/d).

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) As the June 23 session on post-election developments in Armenia by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) approaches, in which Armenia's voting rights could be suspended absent compliance with PACE demands, Armenian broadcast media appear to be taking a somewhat freer posture in reporting the news, and are giving greater air time to opposition figures than was previously the case before and after February's disputed presidential election. Some media insiders claim that this is a smoke-and-mirrors attempt by the GOAM to show outside critics that opposition politicians are indeed receiving broadcast time, but they fear that, as in the past, the loosening will screech to a halt once international focus on Armenia subsides. We will encourage the authorities to continue in this direction and, more importantly, to develop effective policies to safeguard media independence from official pressure. End summary.

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TV MEDIA LIBERALIZING  
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¶2. (C) Since the March 21 end of the State of Emergency and the universal criticism directed at the authorities for imposing draconian restrictions on the media, an increase in coverage of opposition activities and candidates has been noticeable on evening televised news programs. There has even been a smattering of indirect criticism of the authorities on these programs, such as the recent "man-on-the-street" interviews conducted by Armenia's State-operated Public Television, in which citizens aired their doubts about the GOAM-proposed Public Chamber that is intended to promote dialogue within society. In addition to being seen more frequently on the news, opposition politicians have also been able to make their views heard in interviews on television stations. Although some lesser-known opposition activists were seen occasionally on television before this, prominent opposition figures supporting former president Levon Ter-Petrossian are also now appearing in TV interviews.

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"WE'VE SEEN THIS BEFORE"  
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¶3. (C) While media insiders acknowledge the opening up of the broadcast media, some question whether the situation might be analogous to the somewhat greater freedom that broadcasters enjoyed in the weeks before the parliamentary and presidential elections. (Note: This somewhat greater freedom

occurred only in the pre-election campaign, from January 21-February 17. Before the campaign, and right after the election, opposition activists were/have been rarely invited for interviews. End note.) Then, as now, the GOAM was under greater scrutiny by international institutions and other countries, and quickly reverted to a more repressive media environment once that scrutiny ended.

¶4. (C) Tatul Hakobian, Director of the Friday Press Club and a well-known reporter, told Emboffs that he has been pleasantly surprised by recent positive changes in the field of broadcast media. However, he notices that TV stations still do not carry the parts of his club's press conferences that are most critical of the authorities. (Note: It is estimated that 90 percent of the Armenian public receives their news from television. Most of the twenty or so television stations in Armenia are either directly controlled by, or completely subservient to the authorities. Al Plus, Armenia's last truly independent TV station, was forced off the air in 2002 when it lost its frequency license and has seen 13 attempts for a new license rebuffed. End note.) Hakobian predicted that as soon as the authorities sense their grip on power is threatened, they will immediately revert to repressing the media. (Note: Editorial content is largely a function of self-censorship by the TV companies, who clearly know what is permissible and what isn't. Programming content can also be controlled by direct intervention, which in the past has meant either a phone call or meeting with the President's spokesperson, his Chief of Staff, or the Head of Armenia's National Committee on TV and Radio. End note.)

¶5. (C) According to Levon Barseghian, director of the "Asparez" Press Club located in Gyumri (Armenia's second largest city), the changes being made today by the

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authorities are merely superficial. He continues to insist that President Serzh Sargsian and former President Robert Kocharian are indistinguishable in the anti-democratic, hard-line approach they both take to governance, and that those who think that Sargsian is trying to improve the system inherited by Kocharian are greatly mistaken. "I consider these changes a sham," added Barseghian.

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INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE SPURS LIBERALIZATION  
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¶6. (C) Armen Nikoghosian, a media expert from the Yerevan Press Club, recalled the period before Armenia's May 2007 parliamentary elections when local media were again trying to show that they were free, but soon after the monitoring by international organizations came to an end, the situation reverted to the same as before. All three media experts agreed that the current media liberalization taking place is a direct result of pressure being brought to bear by PACE's resolution 1609 and the authorities' fear of seeing the Millennium Challenge Armenian program suspended or terminated.

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COMMENT  
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¶7. (C) Shortly after Serzh Sargsian was inaugurated, a story circulated that Presidential Spokesman Victor Soghomonian had summoned TV broadcasters to his office and told them they should report more on the opposition -- not favorably, not negatively, just more. Whether or not the story is true, that seems to be what is happening. Interestingly, Public Television seems to be going the farthest in that regard, while private broadcasters seem to be more hesitant, perhaps still not quite certain of the consequences they might face if they go too far. Nevertheless, change is in the air. The test will be whether the new openness of the stations

continues once the PACE summer session and MCC eligibility criteria for continued funding are met. We will encourage the authorities to continue in this direction and, over the longer term, to develop procedural and institutional safeguards to limit official influence on the media.

PENNINGTON